

Unpacking the hymns: Great is Thy faithfulness \* Lamentations 3  
Thanksgiving \* October 10, 2022 \* Langford Community Church \* Graham Gladstone

As you know, I spent the summer of 2001 living and working in France. I figured 'I can get a summer job in Ontario or I can get a summer job in France, so why not France?' I was also studying French in university so it was a great opportunity for me to go and to learn the language and soak in the culture that I was learning so much about.

So I packed a bag and took my guitar and off I went to live in France. There were some tough times, like the hostel I spent the night in that wreaked like a bathroom, and I lived on a shoestring budget, but all in all, it was an incredible experience. I had a great place to live, a great place to work, a great church community to be a part of; in many ways that time in France has shaped who I am today.

And as I sat on the floor in the Charles deGaulle airport waiting for the plane to take me home, this melody crept into my mind. 'All I have needed Thy hand hath provided; great is Thy faithfulness Lord unto me.' It floored me. I hadn't heard that song in at least four months and it's not like there were hymns playing in English in France and yet it struck me, this was my heart using this song to remind me what was absolutely true.

All I had needed His hand had provided. Great is His faithfulness Lord unto me.

Have you ever had that experience? The recognition that the hymn Great is Thy faithfulness was telling the truth? That hymn consistently ranks at the top of the most popular hymns<sup>1</sup> and with good reason: it communicates perfectly and powerfully God's faithfulness and so we're going to spend this morning unpacking the hymn, Great is Thy faithfulness.

Now to do that, I would ask you to look with me at the words of the hymn that are printed in the bulletin. If you want to go old school, you can even look it up in the hymn book – it's number 43. As hymns go, Great is Thy Faithfulness is pretty new; next year it will turn one hundred – we should have a party for it – but I think it's been encouraging people ever since it was written.

So let's look at it together, verse 1:

1 Great is thy faithfulness, O God my Father,  
there is no shadow of turning with thee.  
Thou changest not, thy compassions, they fail not;  
as thou hast been, thou forever wilt be.

Good. Now, where is he getting that from? Thomas Chisholm, a teacher and later minister in Louisville Kentucky wrote these words down; where is he getting them from? From his experience? Probably, I mean, I can certainly imagine using these words to describe God but Chisholm had another source, didn't he? It's the Bible.

You might as well turn with me to Lamentations 3:22. Lamentations is just after Jeremiah but before Ezekiel; it's tucked in between those two big ones. And Lamentations 3:22 says -

22 Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail.

23 They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness (Lam 3:22-23 NIV).

That's where Chisholm got the main theme for his hymn. Sure, he could have made it up himself but according to a book written about gospel hymn writers, "His aim in writing was to incorporate as much as Scripture as possible and to avoid flippant or sentimental themes."<sup>ii</sup> And so he used Lamentations 3 for the backbone/thematic frame of his hymn.

Lamentations 3 isn't the only passage he quotes here though. 'There is no shadow of turning with Thee;' where does that come from? Do you recognize that?

It's James; James 1:17 - 17 Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. (Jam 1:17 NIV).

Chisholm takes this verse and says – this is why God is so incredibly faithful. He IS inherently faithful and He will always BE inherently faithful because He doesn't change. There is no shadow of turning in Him. 'As thou hast been thou forever wilt be.' GOD doesn't change and His compassions don't either. 'They fail not.' That's Lamentations 3 again. Verse 22 - Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail.

God has and forever wilt be faithful to His people. That's just who He is. And that leads us into the chorus – again, a paraphrase of Lamentations 3 –

Great is thy faithfulness!  
Great is thy faithfulness!  
Morning by morning new mercies I see...

That's Lamentations 3:23 – God's mercies are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. Chisholm has just flipped the order of these two ideas and added a little rhythm.

Morning by morning new mercies I see. What a testament eh? Do you ever think about that? Do you ever pay attention to that? Every morning, God's mercies to you are new. No matter what happened yesterday, no matter what you need for today, God's mercies to us are new every day. They don't run out. They don't dry up. Every morning, life and breath and strength.

And Chisholm takes it one step further, making clear something that Lamentations 3 I think implies –

all I have needed thy hand hath provided.  
Great is thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me!

If God is never changing and ever providing, day after day, without change, then we will have everything we need. When the LORD is our Shepherd we want for nothing. We will have reason, every day, to recognize that Great is His faithfulness – the Lord's – unto me.

Now verse 2 gets into something that we talked about in our evolution sermon in the summertime – Qs from the pews. Remember Psalm 19? The heavens declare the glory of Heaven, day after day they pour forth speech? The idea here is that we can see evidence of God and His goodness in the world that He has created. And so Chisholm points out all the ways that Creation points to God's faithful love.

Summer and winter and springtime and harvest,

sun, moon, and stars in their courses above  
join with all nature in manifold witness  
to thy great faithfulness, mercy, and love. [Refrain]

There's no verse that I can point directly to to say 'this is where he got this from' but these are all biblical ideas – summer, winter, springtime and harvest – Genesis 1:14 says God created the seasons; the sun and moon mark the days and seasons and years. And it's not just that they tell us what time it is; they tell us what God is like.

Chisholm says the seasons and sun and moon and stars – they join with all nature in manifold witness – to God's faithfulness, mercy and love. Now what's manifold mean? When was the last time you said 'manifold' and weren't talking about an engine? It means diverse, numerous, many-fold – many faceted – Chisholm's point here is that the consistency and dependability of Creation point to God's goodness and faithfulness.

And THAT sounds a lot of Acts 14:17 - 17 Yet he has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy." (Act 14:17 NIV).

Chisholm says that more poetically – all of nature points to a God of great faithfulness, great mercy, great love – and so we naturally sing – Great is Thy faithfulness! Great is Thy faithfulness! That's verse 2; on to verse 3.

Now, if I really wanted to show my preacher's roots, I would say this is the list of five P's.

3 Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth,  
thine own dear presence to cheer and to guide,  
strength for today (perseverance) and bright hope for tomorrow, (promise)  
blessings all mine, with ten thousand beside!

That captures it but it doesn't do justice to the incredible things that Chisholm has pulled together here. This is masterful songwriting that brings together beautifully the inexpressible mercy of God – I mean, if you wanted a brochure laying out the benefits of being God's beloved children, this is it! We have:

Pardon for sin. We turned our backs on our faithful Creator and yet He sent His own Son into the world to pay for our sin so that we can be forgiven. It's like Micah 7:18: NIV Micah 7:18 Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy. Who does that? Who is sovereign over all and yet forgives the sins of an ungrateful creation? Our faithful God does. And as his children we have pardon for sin and we have:

Peace that endureth. Peace with God – Romans 5:1-2, no longer His enemies because of sin but beloved children. Peace within ourselves, given by Jesus Himself, who doesn't give peace as the world gives it, but gives us true inner peace so that our hearts will not be troubled, that we need not be afraid (John 14:27). We have pardon for sin and a peace that endureth; we have:

Thine own dear presence to cheer and to guide. That's a passage like Joshua 1:9 - Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you

wherever you go." (Jos 1:9 NIV). God's presence with us fills us with courage AND shows us the ways to go that lead to His blessing.

Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow – I don't think you could put more succinctly the benefits of following Jesus. I mean, if you were sitting down and doing a cost-benefit analysis before following Jesus – 'what's in it for me?' – it's this – strength for today – the capacity to deal with whatever comes your way, the perseverance to deal with whatever comes along – AND bright hope for tomorrow – the promise of eternal life, in perfected bodies, in the presence of God forever.

Chisholm pulls together this powerful list of mercies given by God and then summarizes – blessings all mine and ten thousand beside – it's like – there's these, plus SO many more I can't even think of in the moment. Ten thousand – myriad,<sup>iii</sup> innumerable, too-many-to-count blessings beside.

Great is Thy faithfulness Lord unto me indeed!

There's the hymn – what do we do with it? We've dug up all the treasure but what are we going to do with it?

Well, first, it is Thanksgiving, so I think that the truths of this should move us to be thankful. I mean, just look at this hymn. Pardon for sin, peace that endureth, strength for today, bright hope for tomorrow, all of creation working together to point to the faithfulness of an unchanging God. This should move us to gratitude. And besides these poetic things, think about your own life.

How have you experienced God's new every morning mercies lately? Have you been on the lookout for them? God is and always will be faithful, if we have eyes and hearts to recognize them! God's never-changing, ever faithful mercies should move us to thanksgiving.

And second, God's never-changing, ever faithful mercies should give us hope.

Here's why I say that. Look again at Lamentations 3. Lamentations 3:19:

19 I remember my affliction and my wandering, the bitterness and the gall.

20 I well remember them, and my soul is downcast within me (Lam 3:19-20 NIV).

In a way, this seems like an odd prologue to the words of Great is Thy faithfulness, but it's only in great times of need that we realize how great God's faithfulness is. This was written at a bottom of the barrel low point in the life of the nation of Israel, and in the author's life as well. You can't go much lower than where this guy was – and yet, what does he say? Verse 21 - 21 Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope.

And what does he call to mind?

22 Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail.

23 They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness (Lam 3:21-23 NIV).

God's never-changing, ever-faithful mercies are reason for hope. When all else fails, God does not, and that knowledge gives the author hope that God will bring him through, that God is at work, even in this mess. And Thomas Chisholm took Lamentations 3 and put it to music so that WE would have hope too.

Your circumstances may change; your stability may fall apart, but God never will. His mercies are new every morning, His presence is with you to cheer and to guide. When troubles come, when trials appear – you look them in the eye and say – Great is God’s faithfulness unto me and so I will have hope. Don’t let your troubles crowd your heart and push out your hope. Instead, call the truths of ‘Great is Thy faithfulness’ to mind and let them buoy your spirits. There may be affliction and there may be gall, but God’s mercies never fail; they are new every morning and that gives me confidence that we will get through.

So let God’s never-changing, ever faithful mercies inspire gratitude. And let God’s never-changing, ever faithful mercies give you hope.

## BENEDICTION

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<sup>i</sup> <https://archives.gcah.org/bitstream/handle/10516/2065/8579947.htm?sequence=1>

<sup>ii</sup> [https://hymnary.org/text/great\\_is\\_thy\\_faithfulness\\_o\\_god\\_my\\_fathe](https://hymnary.org/text/great_is_thy_faithfulness_o_god_my_fathe)

<sup>iii</sup> And I just want to take you on a little rabbit trail here, because have you ever noticed that ten thousand pops up a lot in our music? Blessings all mine and ten thousand beside; Amazing Grace - when we’ve been there ten thousand years, bright shining as the sun. Ten thousand reasons for my heart to find – I think he’s just ‘homaging’ this song.

But what is it about ten thousand that made the songwriters go to it again and again. There’s that hymn ten thousand angels. Well here’s the thing. There are a bunch of times in the Bible where it says – ‘ten thousand.’

Micah 6:7 - 7 Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? (Mic 6:7 NIV).

The parable of the unforgiving servant - 24 As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. (Mat 18:24 NIV).

11 Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. (Rev 5:11 NIV).

In each of these cases, ten thousand doesn’t just mean 9,999+1; it means countless, endless. And I looked behind the English at the Greek and guess what ten thousand is – it’s murious – which is really quite close to our word – myriad. And when you look up myriad in the 1828 American dictionary, which is probably closer to Chisholm’s English than ours, myriad means ten thousand.

So I think that that generation of hymnwriters used ‘ten thousand’ the way we would use the word myriad – to say – not just a big, finite number, but a big open-ended number that goes beyond our ability to count.